

Andreas Winkelmann

THE LAST THING YOU WILL HEAR

Das Letzte, was du hörst

- Number 1 bestselling author Andreas Winkelmann with a new thriller that dives deeper than ever before into the blackest souls: nerve-racking suspense.
- His previous thriller series - *The Girl's House*, *The Delivery*, *The Driver*, *Tha Map* - sold appr. 900,000 copies and rights were sold to Finland (BookBeat), Korea (Arumbook), Sweden (BookBeat) and Turkey (Pegasus).
- English sample translation is available.



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Lean back. Listen to this voice. Nothing else matters during this hour. Forget your daily life, your job, your troubles, your worries. Trust in the words that seem to be made just for you. But be careful. Once you are caught in this world, you will never get out again. This voice is the last one you'll hear.

Sarah is addicted to the podcast *Hörgefühl* that has captivated countless fans. The voice of podcaster Marc Maria Hagen is like a soft pillow, his words like balm for the heart. But Sarah has no idea that someone has been investigating the truth behind the facade. She has no idea that someone has already met with a violent death. She has no idea that a black abyss lurks behind the softly spoken words ...

Andreas Winkelmann, born 1968 in Lower Saxony, is married and has one daughter. He lives with his family in a lonely house on the edge of the forest near Bremen. When he is not diving into the depths of the human soul, he crosses the Alps on foot, climbs the highest mountains or fishes and hunts with a bow and arrow in the Canadian wilderness.

ANDREAS WINKELMANN

THE LAST THING YOU WILL HEAR

Sample translated by Alexandra Roesch

Chapter 1

1

Before

If the monster is hiding under the bed, where else can I hide?

The boy knew that there was a monster under his bed, but it never came out, never, so it hadn't been a problem until now. He had ignored the dark, dusty space under the bed as much as he could, and when he got into bed in the evening and got up in the morning, he had done so with a big enough jump to avoid the risk of being grabbed by the ankle by the monster he called Grudge.

Now the boy stood in his room on the top floor of the house, staring at the black gap under the bed. At the same time, he could hear screams coming from below, horrible, terrifying screams, and they had been going on for ages. They wouldn't stop, and it was no use covering his ears, he had already tried that. The screams were so loud that his hands couldn't keep them out at all.

The boy knew he had to hide.

Because today was the day they had all been dreading.

He couldn't get into the cupboard, there was no room for him, everything was full of shelves, there was no gap for him to squeeze into. He had tried that once, unsuccessfully, another time when things had been bad. But that time the screams had stopped again.

There was no other hiding place in his small room under the roof. Only the dark kingdom under the bed. The boy trembled with the fear of it. Tears came to his eyes and ran down his hot cheeks. In this family, men did not cry, he had been told that often enough, and most of the time he managed to suppress the tears, but not today, not now, when his mother was screaming so terribly.

But because his fear of Grudge was too great, the boy decided to take the bull by the horns. Out of his room, across the landing. Maybe he would make it out and run over to the neighbours who were always so nice and gave him sweets, especially the blue Smurfs he liked so much. They would surely help him, hide him somewhere where there were no monsters - and no fathers who were going to go mad.

Barefoot, the boy stepped up to his bedroom door and pushed down the handle. He had to take a deep breath and swallow the snot in his throat before he managed to open the door. The door scraped a little on the blue carpet, but the sound was drowned out by his mother's screams.

Through the open crack, he looked out at the landing. There was nothing there. Through the slanted window in the roof, a bright square of light fell on the carpet. Outside the sun was shining, it was a beautiful day, warm and bright and friendly. He should have gone out and played with his digger in the pile of sand behind the garage when he had the chance. Too late.

The whole house was already full of screams; they didn't know where to go, just like water shooting out into the open after a dam bursts, they were now shooting into his room. Briefly, the boy wondered if he should open his window so they could get out.

He did not. Instead, he put his bare feet down so carefully that he thought he could feel every loop of the carpet.

And then the screams suddenly stopped.

Between two steps.

One of the boy's feet hovered only inches above the floor, he didn't dare put it down in the silence. A whirring sound could be heard below. It was familiar. It was the sound of steel whirring through the air. When the steel met resistance, the sound changed.

Tears again. Again he trembled. He couldn't hold on any longer, he had to put his foot down, but he did it backwards, because he knew he couldn't escape. Not any more, because Mama was silent.

Footsteps. Heavy footsteps down the landing.

He was coming!

The boy scurried back to his room and gently pushed the door shut. Now that he had no choice, the dark kingdom seemed like a promised land. In front of the bed, he dropped belly-down on the floor, pressed his cheek against the carpet and looked into the blackness.

Nothing moved in it. But there were objects under the bed and he did not know what they were. They were all black and appeared dead. Maybe they were Grudge's victims.

Despite his age, the boy knew exactly what courage was.

Courage was not lowering his eyes when Tobi, the sheepdog down the road, barked like a mad thing on the other side of the wire mesh fence.

Courage was letting Melanie copy at school, even though Mrs Hundertmark, their German teacher, forbade it.

Courage was not crying when Dad raised his hand.

But none of these had ever taken as much courage as this decision. It was almost more than he could manage, and perhaps he wouldn't have managed it at all if he hadn't heard the footsteps on the stairs and the scraping of metal on the banister rails.

He crawled under the bed.

Deep into the black crevice. Right into the middle, where it was particularly dark and he was far away from the world outside. It smelled unpleasant here, and the boy felt something go up his nose, tiny, maybe dust, or maybe the skin scales of the monster. In any case, it immediately tickled his nose, and because he mustn't sneeze, he squeezed his nostrils together with his fingers and breathed only through his mouth. Always very briefly and very little, so that it wasn't so loud.

Where was Grudge? Why didn't he move? Was he lurking at the top end of the bed, already baring his teeth? Or was he reaching out his clawed hand, covered in disgusting scales? The boy thought he felt a slight movement at the top of his head, making his blond hair stand

up, like when he took off his cap on a winter's day at school. That was because of the electricity, the boy knew. But not now. Now it was because of Grudge.

Don't scream.

You mustn't scream.

You must be even quieter than you were at Grandma's funeral.

He pulled himself together, defied his fear, barely breathed, and still the door to his room opened, and in came a smell that overrode everything else. It smelled like the little puddle on the rusty metal behind the garage. Brown water that ate steel.

The steps came closer.

The boy turned his head, wanting to see what was happening, and was horrified to discover that his bare foot was still sticking out from under the bed.

The sharp line between light and darkness was above his ankle; his foot seemed to glow brightly. He tried to bend his leg, to pull his foot to safety, but his muscles would not move. At that moment, the boy realised that the monster was not under the bed at all. It was standing in front of it.

2

"Don't do that! I beg you, don't do it! I ..."

Roya Mayer, who was rarely at a loss for words, did not know what to say. Panic rose in her. This must not happen, not again. Things like this didn't happen twice.

Her gaze darted back and forth between the screen of her mobile phone in its holder on the dashboard and the narrow country road that stretched like a tunnel through the darkness above the woods and meadows. She considered herself a good driver - even though her father had always said otherwise - but at that moment she was happy the traffic was light out here in the country.

"Martina? Are you still there? Please, say something!"

Headlights approached from up ahead, bringing to life the shadows of the mighty oaks at the sides of the road. Ancient, scarred trunks that would withstand a collision without any damage, in stark contrast to Roya's ageing Suzuki. It only had two airbags, one in the steering wheel, one above the glove compartment, and that was it for safety. Its crumple zone was ridiculous; the sheet metal was thin. In this car you really didn't want to have a head-on collision - neither with a tree nor with a vehicle. So Roya took her eyes off her mobile phone and concentrated on the road, following the white line on the right-hand side that disappeared into the darkness outside the headlights and seemed to beckon her there.

The headlights grew bigger and bigger, blinding Roya, and she squinted, clutching the steering wheel and wondering if it wouldn't be better to pull over to the side of the road, turn on the hazard lights and call the police.

But what was she supposed to say? *Hello, I think someone is trying to kill herself?* It was a possibility, and maybe they would believe her, but there was more than one thing stopping her.

When the oncoming car had passed, she dared to look at her mobile phone again. There were still only the six words on the display.

"Help me ... I'm at the tree ... "

With a swift movement, Roya tapped the speaker symbol for a voice recording.

"Martina! Talk to me, please. I want to hear your voice!"

But Martina would not or could not speak. Fifteen minutes ago, she had received this short text message, incomprehensible to anyone else, but Roya had a suspicion about what was going on. Martina was unwell. And Roya had the feeling that she was partly to blame for this. Maybe her questions had shaken Martina up too much, maybe Roya had asked too insistently and probed too deeply, but how could she have known that Martina Spiekermann was so unstable? A week ago Martina had made a firm impression on Roya. Far from self-confident, but with perspective and good insights into the things she was concerned about. What had changed since then? And why did Martina turn to Roya in this desperate situation? She was just a journalist researching for an article and hardly knew the woman. Admittedly, they had had a special connection right from the start. There was an affinity between them, and at another time or in another life they might even have become friends.

Roya sent another voice message.

"Martina, I'm sure we can work this out. Let's just talk about it. I really enjoyed our conversation the other day and ... quite honestly, I like you much better than most of the people I have to deal with. Won't you give me a call? Right now?"

Roya had tried to reach Martina several times. She didn't pick up. And Martina did not respond to her request to call. The screen remained blank and Roya's heart began to beat even faster than it was already. She had to keep Martina on the line; whatever happened, she could not let the communication stop, but at the same time she could not pull up the car either. No one else knew where Martina was, and even if Roya called the emergency services, they would not be able to get there before her. It was all up to her. She was the only one who could help Martina at that moment.

"Say something, say anything," Roya urged herself as her thumb hovered over the loudspeaker symbol. But she couldn't think of the right words. What did you say to a person to stop them from killing themselves?

Roya tried the truth.

"Martina, we have a plan! You and I, together we will make sure that no more people get taken in by him. But I need your help, you hear? I can't do it without you."

There was no reply. The silence on the other end of the line made Roya despair. She thought back to their conversation of a fortnight ago.

Martina had been leaning against the beech tree, looking out over the meadow. Although Martina was almost the same age as Roya, her innocent, childlike manner made her seem younger. The skin on her face was smooth and pure; her dark blonde hair fell to her shoulders and shimmered in the sunlight. Martina was a pretty and it was only her deep-set and thus always dark eyes that stood out from the otherwise symmetrical shape of her face. She spoke hesitantly, always careful not to say anything that could hurt others or lead to a discussion in which she would have to assert herself. She did not know how to assert herself. She had a deep desire for harmony, for a world without quarrels, without violence or even raised voices.

"We'll find a way, Martina. You know... "

Roya was about to tell Martina the whole truth, but she didn't. The truth was too confusing and Roya wasn't even sure she was on the right track. What if she was wrong?

The screech of the horn came out of nowhere. Deafening and shrill, it jolted Roya back to the reality of a country road at seven in the evening, where she was once again confronted by headlights. But this time they were huge - and damn close! Without noticing, Roya had slid into the oncoming lane; half of her Suzuki was to the left of the solid line that marked an overtaking ban here due to the poor visibility of the bend.

Roya jerked the wheel around. Too violently. She immediately tried to correct it, then steered again, hitting the brakes too hard, so that within seconds she lost control of the small car, which shot across the road from right to left like a ball in a pinball machine. The right front wing of her car hit the crash barrier first. Then her car collided with the next crash barrier. Glass shattered, sheet metal dented, the car squealed heartbreakingly. After the third collision, the car took off and overturned. Roya clung with all her strength to the steering wheel, from which the airbag suddenly exploded in her face. Gravity was suspended, up was down and down was up, she lost her bearings completely, screamed her panic into the white plastic shell, felt a violent blow to the head and then another and lost consciousness.

When she became aware of her surroundings again, the car was still. Roya was hanging upside down in her seatbelt, her neck bent, blood dripping from a wound on her forehead onto the ceiling of the car. She felt no pain; she did not even feel her body, but rather had the impression that she had slipped out of it.

Was she dead?

Her eyes fell on the mobile phone. It had fallen out of its cradle and was lying next to the rapidly growing bloodstain on the roof of the car. There was a large crack across the screen.

Roya mustered all her strength and reached out with her right hand. She could move it, so she wasn't dead, after all. She tapped the screen and the phone lit up. The messenger app she had used to communicate with Martina Spiekermann was still open, and it had been six minutes since her last message. She had been unconscious longer than she thought.

Six minutes of silence must have felt like an eternity to someone wanted to take their own life.

Roya wanted to press the microphone icon to record another voice message, but the icon was so small, far too small to hit with her trembling fingers, and the phone kept dissolving before her eyes. Her eyelids fluttered; her skull throbbed as if it was about to burst. Roya knew she was about to pass out again.

In a halfway lucid second, Roya recognised the microphone symbol and pressed it.

"Martina ... I'm here ... I'm coming to you, you hear. And then we'll find a solution, please ... don't do it. "

No reaction.

Blood dripped into the silence. She felt herself falling. Before Roya drifted off, she heard a knock on the side window and looked up into a man's face.

"Don't worry, I'll get you out of there," he said in a voice that sounded very muffled, and that was the last thing she heard.

"Are you serious? I get off work on time and you dump me? I'm starting to want to kill the guy and cut him up into pieces..."

Sarah Henschel ripped the headphones out of her ears. Her car had been in the garage since yesterday, so she had had to take the bus, and Sarah hated taking the bus. At least she could shut herself off from the world a little with music during the journey, but then the voicemail from her boyfriend Björn had arrived and spoiled everything.

Sarah loved Björn and most of the time he treated her like a princess and fulfilled her every wish, but if he wasn't at the top of her list of priorities, he was quickly offended. Yet he knew exactly what she was going to do tonight, that these two hours were her special time to herself. And now he was jealous of a podcaster and had said such a childish thing.

Sarah put the mobile phone in her backpack. She didn't want to be forced to make a decision now. Björn simply had to learn that time out was also part of a relationship. Maybe Sarah should rethink the idea of moving into the flat they were planning to share soon.

Sarah distracted herself with a glance around the bus. She had worked a late shift at the nursing home, and the bus was sparsely occupied at that time. Only five other passengers were on it. Sarah looked for a smile, a cheerful expression, a special colour, but saw only displeasure, indifference and distrust.

It was just par for the course that Björn had decided to be so infuriating today. Her new boss had once again been particularly annoying, and it was impossible to please him. For years, the pressure had been increasing and the demands had been rising, Sarah had to constantly justify why she couldn't manage with the time slots allocated- inhuman time constraints in a supposedly caring profession. And the new boss had actually started to time the employees. Only now and again, but all the same, and he seemed to have set his sights on Sarah in particular. He was a cost-optimiser, a bean-counter. She, on the other hand, liked to hold someone's hand when they were in a bad way. How would they ever get along with this guy?

Sarah increasingly wondered how long she could take the pressure. She actually loved her job, but she didn't want to be broken by it. Having children with Björn and escaping into family life for a while seemed like a good, sensible alternative. Björn talked about children all the time. Having a large family was important to him.

Fortunately, there was a ray of hope at the end of this annoying day.

Tonight. At exactly 8pm.

Her favourite podcast!

If she closed her eyes, she could already hear the voice. It was like the voiceover in a film. With a charismatic, deep voice, darkly coloured, but at the same time with a soft timbre. A voice that immediately captivated the audience. Calm like a great river that flowed through the landscape aware of its eternity. Sarah could listen herself to this voice for hours, and she would do so tonight, no matter what Björn thought. Once a week, this date was fixed, Björn knew that. Sure, Sarah could have listened to the recording of the podcast on another day, but the new episode always came out on Mondays, and it was only new on this evening.

Why didn't Björn understand that? It was the same as with his beloved football! He didn't watch a recording of that either.

So why this childish jealousy? Had she raved about the voice too often?

The bus was approaching her stop. Sarah stood up and positioned herself by the rear door. Rain was beating against it. This depressing November weather had been going on for days, cold and wet, grey and unpleasant. Sarah had been in her job long enough to know that this month and this weather had an impact on people. In the nursing homes, the death rate rose. Those who had no strength left gave up more easily now than in the summer.

Sarah noticed someone who also wanted to get off at the next stop. Based on the stature and clothing, she thought it was a man, his face hidden in the shadow of the rain hood of his grey outdoor jacket. He was wearing jeans and black boots. A thin white cable peeked out from his neck, leading to the smartphone in his hand. He probably had headphones in his ears, like everyone these days. People stopped listening to each other; they found everything else more important than the person standing in front of them. The man kept his head down and seemed to be completely immersed in the world he was listening to.

The bus stopped and Sarah got off. Into the cold air and drizzle. She pulled her shoulders up, her scarf around her neck, pulled the hood of her jacket over her head, grabbed the shoulder straps of her backpack, turned left and walked along the pavement. She strode out strongly, wanting to get home quickly so that she could get ready for the podcast in peace, but after ten steps she turned around because she had the feeling that she was being watched.

The man from the bus was still standing there.

Facing in her direction, stiff as a board, shoulders slumped, his gaze following her. In the cone of light from the streetlamp a veil of rain was falling on him. Only now did Sarah notice how worn his boots were.

She made sure she got away.

Her mobile phone rang aggressively in her pocket.

4

The coarse rope rubbed into the damp bark of the tree with every swing - and at the other end into the delicate skin on the young woman's neck. The mechanical indifference of the movement resembled that of a metronome. Back and forth, back and forth, the rhythm was set by the wind that made the dead body swing.

And then the young woman on the rope opened her eyes and mouth wide; a silent scream escaped her, a screaming accusation in her eyes: Why didn't you come? Why didn't you save me?

Roya Mayer opened her eyes.

Bright, wildly flickering lights, unfamiliar noises and strange voices surrounded her. Above it all a strange smell, a mixture of rust and rubber and petrol.

The world outside was frightening and Roya wanted to shut it out, but she wanted even less to return to that dream, that horrible dream she had just had. She was still in its clutches, she could feel it trying to drag her back into the darkness, where images and screams blended into a horror scenario she could only watch.

The flickering light turned to pain behind her forehead, but she suppressed the first impulse to close her eyes again, instead forcing them wide open, but still could barely make anything out.

Instead, Roya heard voices, close to her. *Concentrate on that. You have to know what they are saying, they are your salvation, because they are not part of the nightmare.*

"...must have been talking on the phone...found a mobile phone...but it was damaged during the rescue ...it's not working...typical mobile phone accident...the same thing over and over again, people just don't learn..."

She heard the words, understood their meaning, but did not see the people who were having the conversation. Around her, blue light continued to flicker in rapid rhythm, somewhere in it there was movement, but Roya's field of vision was too narrow to follow the movements. It was as if she was wearing blinkers.

"Martina!" Roya groaned, and in her head, it sounded as if she was shouting out the name. In reality, however, it was no more than a croak - but at least it attracted attention.

"She's conscious!" someone shouted. A woman wearing a police cap bent over Roya and blocked the twitching blue light. Roya's vision was too blurred to make out more than a bright, blurry face with eyes.

"Can you understand me?" the policewoman asked.

Before Roya could answer, another person bent over her and put a hand to her cheek. What a nice, warm feeling that was, powerful enough to beat back the tentacles of the dream.

"Everything will be all right," this person said in a kind voice. "You are safe. You had an accident, but don't worry, everything will be fine. My name is Stefan, I'm the emergency doctor, I'll take you to the hospital straight away and I'll look after you until we get there. Can you tell me your name?"

"Martina ...", Roya groaned again.

"Now, Martina, please stay calm and ..."

"No, no, no, my name is Roya ... Martina ... I have to help her."

"That will have to wait, now we have to help you first."

"Who is Martina?", the policewoman intervened. "Was there anyone else in the car?"

"No, there was no one," replied a male voice that had not yet spoken. "There is no sign of anyone else in the car. We searched everywhere, no-one was thrown out..."

Roya heard every word of the conversation and was annoyed that the people around her did not understand her.

"She...she is waiting by her tree...she wants to kill herself," Roya stammered desperately. Why was she unable to formulate a sentence clearly? In her head, all the urgent information was there and available, but somehow it all got jumbled on the way to her lips.

"We have to leave now," said the emergency doctor.

"No, wait a minute..."

"The policewoman bent lower over Roya. "Roya, my name is Katja...can you tell me if you were on the phone with Martina when the accident happened?" she asked.

Roya wanted to nod, but couldn't move her head, it seemed to be fixed.

"I have to see her...can you help me, please!"

"Of course, I'll help you. Can you tell me where to find Martina?"

Of course Roya could tell her, what a stupid question. Martina was ... Martina was ... at her favourite tree, her soul place, where she went when she needed to think, when she wanted to be alone, when she was feeling bad. This secret place that even her partner didn't know about, but Martina had led Roya there for the interview. Only there had it been possible for her to open up.

"I ... I ..."

Roya strained, but she couldn't master her thoughts; they dissolved, blurred, and then suddenly there was that terrible sound again.

The creaking of the rough rope on the branch of the tree in the rhythm of the swinging body.

Back and forth and back and forth ...

5

A voice can be like a face.

You can recognise a person's character, qualities and emotions. Every nuance of change in the voice is reflected in expressive facial expressions. When the eyebrows are brought together, the colour of the voice sinks into darkness, and with a smile it rises again. A lie is often accompanied by a searching, unsteady look, and then the voice goes wandering, its pitch changes; it is not sure where it's going and allows itself to be steered in different directions by spontaneous ideas.

For Sarah Henschel, Marc Maria Hagen's voice had a face. She didn't need to see his real face - hardly anyone had seen it anyway – and it might be even better if she didn't see it. When she heard his voice, she saw a face with an earthy complexion, framed by thick dark hair. She saw brown eyes with a depth that no-one could measure. This face had laughter lines at the corners of the eyes and mouth. When Marc laughed, he infected everyone with his irrepressible energy. At the same time, however, his face reflected sad and profound experiences, which allowed him to play a virtuoso melody on the keyboard of human emotions. This man had seen a lot and experienced a lot, but no matter how bad things got, his optimism was unbroken, his confidence and trust deep and unshakeable.

Sarah Henschel loved this voice. She loved the podcast "Hear & Feel", which Marc Maria Hagen had been broadcasting for two years. It was now the most popular and successful podcast in the field of mental health coaching, with many people clamouring to be invited as a guest on the podcast or to the seminars and live events that Hagen regularly hosted. Anyone could apply, and Sarah Henschel had already started sending applications months ago to the unusual email address of the podcast: info@skarabaeus.com. This was anything but easy. It was anything but easy, because she had to answer questions like: How do you define happiness? Where does your deepest hurt come from? How easy or difficult is it for you to open up to strangers? What thoughts do you use to cheer yourself up when you are down?

So far, only a confirmation of receipt had come back, but maybe one day she would be able to pull the big one and talk to Marc Maria Hagen about the really important things in life.

Until then, she listened to the podcast “Hear & Feel” every Monday evening. This one hour had the same effect on her as a spa weekend; afterwards Sarah felt better, no matter how shitty the day was, and she always took a few special sentences from it with her into everyday life. These were words that preoccupied her, from which she could learn lessons which changed her perspective and steered her own circling thoughts in new directions.

When she arrived home, the first thing she did was feed her tomcat Mavi. Mavi was the Turkish word for blue, and Sarah, who assigned colours to people, animals, things and experiences, found that her cat was blue. Blue like a calm lake or a clear summer sky.

Marc Maria Hagen was earth-coloured. A mixture of brown, beige, black, green and ochre. Someone like him could never be just one colour; he was too multifaceted for that.

Her boyfriend Björn was yellow with dark spots and Sarah didn't yet know what these stood for.

Mavi slunk around Sarah's bare lower legs while she prepared his food. She liked the feel of his silky fur against her skin. As she placed the bowl on the kitchen floor, Mavi took the time to nudge his nose against hers and thanked her with a pleasant purr before he hungrily devoured the food. Mavi had always done that and Sarah loved him for it.

She let him eat, washed her hands and face and changed into some comfy clothes. Then she prepared her own favourite salad. It consisted of cucumbers, tomatoes, radishes, walnuts, sunflower seeds and a few strips of chicken breast and she drowned it all in cold-pressed olive oil from Greece. Just a dash wasn't enough - the salad had to float!

With the bowl, Sarah plopped down on the sofa and ate while checking her mobile phone for emails and messages on Insta and WhatsApp.

More messages had arrived from Björn. He was acting all huffy, claiming that he always had to do things her way, that his concerns didn't matter and that it couldn't go on like this.

Sarah didn't reply. She had no intention of letting Björn ruin her podcast evening.

She switched to the mail folder. What she discovered there made her freeze, then she choked on a slice of cucumber and had to rush to the kitchen to clear her throat with a sip of water.

She had a message from the email address: "info@skarabaeus.com"! For God's sake! Was that...?

Together with Mavi, Sarah crept barefoot back into the living room. From two steps away she looked at the mobile phone on the sofa. Her heart was pounding in her chest. Excitement made the blood rush to her ears and cheeks.

"Mavi, if that's my invitation, I'm going to freak out. "Sarah picked up the phone but didn't sit down on the sofa again; she was much too nervous for that now. Standing up, she opened the mail folder and selected the audio message. Sarah turned up the volume and played the file.

"Hey hey, this is Brittany, Marc Maria Hagen's personal assistant from the Hear & Feel podcast. Sarah, my dear, a spot has opened up in the next Hear & Feel coaching session, and Marc has chosen you for it. We would like to invite you for a preliminary talk next Tuesday at 5 pm. The address and further information can be found in the attachment. I know this is short notice, but if you still want to come, let me know. I'm sure it will be great!"

Sarah played the message four times in a row, standing stock-still in the middle of the living room, ignoring Mavi's increasingly insistent pleas for attention, and feeling her stomach churn.

She was going to talk to Marc. With Marc Maria Hagen, *the* mental health coach podcaster. He found her, a 29-year-old care worker for the elderly, interesting enough to invite her on.

"Mavi, tell me I'm not dreaming," she begged her cat.

As if he had been waiting for this, he jumped onto the back of the sofa and from there onto her right shoulder, where he purred in her ear. Sarah slumped down on the sofa and took him off. She had been sick to her stomach a moment ago, but now she felt queasy when she thought about the fact that she would have to take time off for the interview. Maybe she could persuade Karen to swap shifts with her. Karen liked the podcast too and would freak out when she heard about it.

"I can't believe it," Sarah said quietly to herself and Mavi. She felt that her life was taking a fateful turn.

6

Inspector Carola Barreis stopped her police vehicle in front of a dilapidated-looking wooden bridge.

'I've no time for this crap,' she said to herself.

She was tired, in a bad mood because she had to go out into the cold night in this filthy weather, and she was not going to risk sinking the car in this stream - whether there was a drama happening on the other side or not. But turning around and driving away was out of the question, so Inspector Barreis pushed open the car door and got out. Her breath created a cloud of steam. It was already surprisingly cold for early November. If it continued like this, she would have to emigrate sooner than she had planned. Carola Barreis did not tolerate the cold at all well; it affected her mood and crept into her bones. In moments like these, Carola remembered the words of her mother, who had been dead for a long time: *Child, you have to eat, otherwise you'll be as skinny as this forever and you'll be cold all your life.* Well, that's exactly what happened. Carola had eaten for all she was worth, but still remained skinny as a rake, and today, at 59, she felt she was freezing faster and more deeply than ever before.

Carola Barreis pulled her jacket up under her chin to protect herself from the cold and the drizzle and walked to the bridge. The thick oak planks sounded hollow under the heels of her boots. She was surprised that there was still a bridge like this in Germany. But this was a farm road that ran across farmland, and probably no one was interested in spending money on a replacement bridge as long as the old one still stood. And the tractor tracks Carola discovered spoke for themselves. If this structure carried tractors, it would probably carry her Golf too.

Carola let her gaze wander.

Beyond the bridge, which was barely ten metres long and led over a narrow stream with little water, the gravelled path turned into a lane with a sward in the middle and climbed up a hill

between fields. It was too dark to see where the lane led, but Carola thought she could make out the black wall of a forest on the horizon. That would fit the description she had received from the traffic police. A colleague had informed Carola that a woman who had been injured in an accident was allegedly on her way to prevent a suicide when she crashed. With difficulty, she had been able to describe the place where a woman named Martina allegedly wanted to take her own life.

And it was right here. On the only elevation far and wide.

A group of old beech trees on a hilltop. At the highest point of the hill, a huge beech tree, very conspicuous, you can't miss it.

Carola had asked the traffic policewoman to follow it up herself, but she was unavailable as she was still at the scene of the accident and since Carola was on duty, she had no choice but to go herself.

She assumed that this was a mistake or a hoax. Maybe this Martina of whom the injured woman had spoken was just playing a joke or, if not, had abandoned her plan. Carola had been with the police long enough to know that many intended suicides were just a cry for attention and help and did not end in death.

Carola Barreis did not think she would find anyone here. Whatever was behind this strange story, the injured woman from the crashed car had probably fallen victim to a wicked prank. So far, no-one knew anything about the background, as the woman was no longer responsive and was on her way to the hospital. Of course, Carola realised that she couldn't just ignore it, but decided it was enough for her to check on her own first. If, contrary to her expectations, there were problems, she could always call for back-up.

Maybe the accident victim had just made up some wild story to explain why she had been using her mobile phone while driving. Men and women were equally creative when it came to that, no matter how ridiculous their excuse sounded.

Carola got back into the car and glanced in the rear-view mirror. "Don't shit yourself, there's no body", she said to herself.

Then she carefully steered the car over the bridge. The wooden planks thudded under the tyres. Carola liked the sound, it sounded reliable. On the sandy road, the tall grass scratched the chassis of the car. She didn't like that sound; it sounded as if something with long claws was desperately trying to get into the car. The dirt road wound up the hill. On one side there was still maize growing; the plants were a good two to three metres high and completely dried out. Carola thought they looked like an army of the undead in the light of the headlights; some of the stalks even waved at her. On the other side was a huge field that had long since been harvested.

Did that happen? Farmers forgetting a field?

"I'd prefer a surname, then I can ring a doorbell," Carola had told the traffic policewoman on the phone.

But she couldn't give more than "Martina". The injured woman was no longer responsive, and without a surname there was no address, so Carola had to drive through the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night.

At least she had taken the right turning. The woman had explicitly mentioned the stream and the bridge near the village of Feldkirchen. As she got closer to the crest, she spotted a row of tall trees on the left, stretching to the highest point.

Directly in front of it, the dirt road branched off to the right and left. Carola stopped the car but left the engine running.

She reached for the driving mirror and turned it a little to the left.

Had she just seen something?

A brief flash of light in the darkness behind her, near where she had driven over the bridge? Carola turned around, looked more closely, but now there was nothing there.

"You must have made a mistake," she said aloud to herself, turned off the engine, took the torch from the glove compartment, got out, and took a few steps away from the car, but left the torch off so that her eyes could get used to the darkness.

"Hello? Is anyone there?" called Carola. "Martina?"

Silence. Deep blackness under the trees. Rain pattered softly on the leaves, knocking many of them to the ground.

Carola shone her light on the edge of the forest. Suddenly, somewhere in the forest, a deer cried out. Startled, Carola flinched.

She fought the strong urge to get back into the car. Not because of the darkness or the screeching bark of the deer; things like that did not frighten her. There was nothing to be afraid of in the woods at night, but there was in her head. There was no room for one more. The measure was full, she had felt it for a long time and was afraid of the consequences if she ignored the warnings. Which she did. Because it was her job and she was expected to do it. Everyone naturally assumed that an experienced, detached officer like her, an "old" public servant, would have no problem with it.

But in her profession, experience was nothing more than an accumulation of terrible images and experiences. And every person had their own individual measure of how much of it they could bear.

"There's no corpse," Carola said to herself. "And even if there is, you can cope with one more."

She walked forward. First she followed the sandy path to the right and then turned towards the hill. By the light of the torch, she thought she could make out a trail leading through the beech trees.

Suddenly, she thought she saw movement in the undergrowth to her left. She stopped abruptly and shone her torch.

The cone of light from the torch cut a hole in the darkness, but there was nothing but trees and bushes. Somewhere in the undergrowth there was a crackling sound, and a moment later an owl called out. Just forest sounds.

"Go on, keep going," Carola said to herself.

The path went steeply uphill, and she began to pant. At least she was no longer freezing.

There was dead wood from the crowns of the old beeches on the ground. Carola orientated herself by the terrain. The injured woman had spoken of the highest point, so she just kept going until she could go no higher.

The mighty beech stood out as a silhouette against the lighter night sky. Long branches stretched out towards the meadow, almost as thick as tree trunks themselves.

Carola directed the light of the torch towards the crown, searching the individual branches ...

Her heart thumped dully in her chest. Suddenly she felt empty and sad.

The head of the corpse was bent forward, her long hair hiding her face. She was wearing yellow sneakers with white soles, tight jeans and a hoodie.

"Hello!", Carola called out against her better judgement.

No reaction.

Carola emitted a strange sound. Something between a growl and a retch. She didn't want to take a step closer, but knew she had to find out if the woman was dead. Suddenly Carola became really angry. At the woman who had caused the accident. At the traffic policewoman who had been prudent enough to call her. At that woman by the tree. Because they were all doing this to her.

The anger flared up only briefly, passed and gave way again to emptiness and sadness.

Carola Barreis rallied herself and stepped forward until she was standing in front of the woman and shone the light into her face.

Stiff, wide-open eyes.

In her ears were those white ear pods that you saw everywhere nowadays and that Carola called brain plugs. The woman had probably taken her own life to beautiful music.

That at least.

Carola knew she wasn't allowed to touch anything, but her curiosity was too great. With pointed fingers she picked the right pod out of the corpse's ear and put it in her own ear to activate it.

"... do what your inner voice tells you, it is the only voice that never lies to you..."

A noise made Carola flinch.

Somewhere in the darkness of the forest a dry branch broke. Reflexively, she dropped the ear pod and jumped to the light of the torch but couldn't see anything. When she turned it back to the corpse, she had the impression for a fraction of a second that the fingers on the right hand had moved.

Only now did she notice that both of the corpse's hands were covered in blood. Not just a few splatters and spots, no, the hands looked as if they had been bathed in blood.

With a groan of agony and horror, Carola turned away from the corpse, and although at that moment her own feelings were uppermost, she had the distinct feeling that someone was close by. She wheeled around, shone her light into the darkness again, but there was no one there.

Suddenly she was frightened and just wanted to get away.

7

"Only what you hear and feel deep inside you counts. Always and everywhere. Your inner voice should always be the last thing you hear as soon as you have to make a decision. There is no higher authority, no-one who knows better."

Sarah Henschel surrendered completely to Marc Maria Hagen's voice; it was as if she were sinking into a soft pillow after a stressful day. Just leaning back, blocking out the world, immersing herself in peace and quiet.

"I have a question from Daniel on the screen," Marc continued. During the podcast you could send Marc questions, which he usually answered immediately.

"But what if my inner voice is confused, if it tells me this today and that tomorrow? I often have the feeling that I can't trust it."

"I can tell you this, my dear Daniel: your inner voice is never confused. It is always clear and distinct. But there are situations in which, under stress or pressure, we don't listen in the right way. Now, of course, we need to know what is the right way to listen?"

Marc Maria Hagen paused, and Sarah Henschel held her breath. The podcast Hear & Feel was coming to an end. She had been listening for almost sixty minutes and was completely captivated by Marc's charismatic voice and his incredible empathy. But the guests' questions could also have come from her. Of course, people's problems were similar, and Hear & Feel had featured and analysed many issues, but Sarah still felt welcome and supported in this large community. She was not alone; there were many others out there who were tormented by the same problems, asking themselves similar questions. A major unique selling point of the Hear & Feel podcast was that Marc Maria Hagen connected people with each other. Anyone who wanted to, could get contact details through him and exchange ideas outside the podcast. Sarah had already done this several times and had only had good experiences. The community that grew under the umbrella of the podcast became bigger and bigger, a crowd of people who cared about each other, supported each other, offered help. What could be better than that?

Sarah waited eagerly. The pause was perhaps a little too long, but that was what Sarah liked about Marc. He took his time, didn't just blurt out anything, but rather thought for longer and, when he answered, he did it with depth and substance.

"My dear Daniel," Marc Maria Hagen began, and, listening to his voice, Sarah could picture his face at that moment as though she were watching him on a television talk show. A face full of warmth and wisdom, but also with doubts and fears, because Marc kept saying about himself that no human being is infallible or omniscient and he certainly wasn't.

"You know, I spent a long time thinking up a suitable name for my podcast," Marc continued thoughtfully. "It couldn't be just any name, just because it might be catchy and easy to remember. No, the name should express what the podcast is about. It should convey the important message that I want to send to all of you out there, and also to you, Daniel, with the help of my voice. And then suddenly, one night, when I was still sitting at my desk in my little room under the roof, working, the name was there. It stood before my inner eye like a manifestation, vivid, beautiful and elegant, and I knew immediately that this was it. Hear & Feel. I felt it. It contains everything you need to know, my dear Daniel. Do you know why?"

Another pause.

"Hear & Feel means listening. Listening to what others tell you, and in my opinion that is the worst thing you can do. Man, you must know, dear Daniel, is a profoundly selfish being. He does nothing without looking to his own advantage. So when someone gives you advice, you only play second fiddle in the cost-benefit calculation. He plays the first fiddle himself. And I say this without any judgement, it is simply the way it is, that is how we humans are made. There is

only one way to escape this advice trap. You know, our nose can only smell what is outside of us, our eyes can only see what is around us. Our skin only perceives touch from outside. Our senses are therefore specialised in external perception. This is of course a great advantage for the survival of our species because the world is full of dangers. But nature would not be so perfect if it had not also given us an inner perception. We can listen to ourselves, because there is a voice inside us that has always spoken to us and is the wisest advisor imaginable. Now you can claim that this makes me and my podcast superfluous, but that is missing the point. I am not concerned with giving advice, but rather sensitising you and all the others out there for the hearing and listening process."

Sarah Henschel would have liked to applaud Marc. She had the conviction that she understood Marc Maria Hagen like no one else, and it made her heart pound to think that she would soon be face to face with him.

"We have all forgotten how to listen. What is the reason for this? Mainly images. The arrival of television in our lives has gradually silenced our sensitive inner ear. Our eyes have taken over, but the eyes can only show us what takes place outside of us, what others create, make, change, fake, manipulate. And we tend to believe what we see. You know the saying 'I'll believe it when I see it', don't you?"

Marc waited a moment as if he were getting answers to his question.

"You see! That's how deep the indoctrination goes for you too. Eyes before ears, that's what has led to the introduction of images as a source of experience. Cinema and television started it all, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok make it worse, make us deaf to ourselves. We see others, all the others, all over the world, but we can no longer hear ourselves, and that creates a horribly deep and wide emptiness in us, which we try to fill by consuming even more images, and thus we are stuck in the middle of a vicious circle from which there seems to be no escape."

Marc Maria Hagen had talked himself into a passion. Sarah could hear how close this issue was to his heart, how concerned he was about the suffering of his fellow human beings. That made him authentic and compelling, and Sarah felt like shouting out loud "Yes, yes, yes". The only thing that stopped her was that she was alone in her flat and it would have been weird.

"But it only seems that way," Marc continued. "Because in fact there is an escape. We all carry the potential within us, since time immemorial. It is there, we just have to learn to use it again. Our own voice is the first thing we hear; throughout our lives it is our most important guide - and it is the last thing we hear."

"I know I have said it many times before, but I will never tire of repeating it. There is one thing that gives power to our inner voice, makes it loud, and that is love. Love yourself, love your neighbour, and you will be at peace with yourself and the world."

Marc's voice faded into soft pan flute music before a speaker took over the outro.

"This was the latest episode of the podcast Hear & Feel by and with Marc Maria Hagen. If you liked it, listen again next week. In the meantime, feel free to visit our website or blog, join the forum, discuss and enrich yourself and others. In the shop you can buy all previous episodes on MP3 and order Marc's books, which are of course also available as audio books, read by Marc himself. And remember, soon there will be another of Marc's coaching sessions. The number of participants is limited; email us if you are interested."

Sarah's heart leapt with joy when the announcer of the outros mentioned the coaching. She would soon be taking part in this coaching herself, meeting Marc Maria Hagen in person and letting him teach her how to better deal with her own feelings in this crazy, sprawling, incredibly stressful world.

The weekend with Marc would cost two thousand euros, including accommodation and food. That's about as much as Sarah earned in a month. She didn't actually have the money to spare, and would have to forego her next summer holiday, but it was worth it to her.

What better way was there to invest the money than in herself?

8

Death is lurking here.

That was Carola Barreis' first thought when she got out of the car an hour later in a residential street in the village of Feldkirchen.

Houses could certainly seem threatening, she had always felt that way, and the house she was standing in front of now looked like something from a nightmare. Dark stone, dark roof, no light anywhere.

Martina Spiekermann had not died in this house, but death had certainly taken possession of her between these walls that she had called home. Carola Barreis imagined how the black devil had crept into Martina's thoughts during lonely nights and gruelling days and hijacked her, quietly and secretly at first, then more and more powerfully, until there was no way out for the young woman.

And now Carola had to knock on this door and bring bad news to those who were left behind.

In the daylight and without the knowledge she had, this was probably quite a nice place in the right company. Small-town idyll, lots of green around, quiet people philosophising about the state of the world from the seat of their ride-on lawnmowers. Carola had grown up like this herself. In her younger years, she had looked at these people with disdain, especially after moving to the big city. But that view had changed. Today she knew that there was more of the right wisdom here than people thought. Here it was nature – not data, algorithms or the latest fashion trends – that influenced people's thinking and feeling and dictated the rules.

An officer from the local police station in Feldkirchen, who had had to be called out of bed because the station was only staffed until 8 p.m., had been able to identify the woman hanging from the tree and give her last name and place of residence. He was familiar with the Spiekermann family. Tim Spiekermann was supposedly a hothead who sometimes let his fists do the talking, as he had proved at a couple of the local festivals. Only when drunk, but still.

Had the man beaten his wife?

The officer said no.

Perhaps that was why Martina Spiekermann had fled from her house that evening to go into the woods and kill herself?

The officer couldn't imagine that.

But the officer also played football with Tim Spiekermann and had already had the odd beer or two with the man. Proximity had changed his perspective, he had become closed-minded, a blinker effect had set in. Who would think a friend of theirs was capable of domestic violence?

They might never know the answer, because it was quite possible that a tragedy had taken place in that house. The blood on the woman's hands could not have come from herself, because there were no bleeding wounds on her body. She had done something before she went into the forest. Nobody yet knew what Martina Spiekermann had died of. Externally, she had no wounds. But the autopsy would answer that question, and Carola, who hated autopsies, was already thinking about how she would get around it.

She decided not to take with her the two patrol colleagues, who were waiting in the unlit patrol car at the side of the road. They had slipped quietly and unobtrusively into this residential street; blue lights and sirens at night would have unnecessarily woken the neighbours. They would find out soon enough what had happened.

The path to the front door was neatly paved, but again with the dark stone that seemed to dominate everything here. Cheerfulness and colour were strongly intertwined, Carola thought, and both were missing here. In her opinion, a house like this would fit in in a city where dark villas with slits instead of windows were springing up like mushrooms, but here in the country it seemed out of place. The shutters were down in front of all the windows.

Carola found a doorbell on the front door and lit it up briefly with her mobile phone. Spiekermann. No other name, so she would probably not encounter anyone other than the husband. According to the police officer who knew the area, the couple had no children.

At least that was something, Carola thought, and pulled the keys from her pocket. People rarely broke their habits, and Martina Spiekermann had pocketed her keys, as she always did. Had she known then that she would not be coming back?

When does one make such a decision?

In the hours or days before? Or had Martina only made it when she reached the tree that the accident victim said was her favourite place? At least that part Carola could understand. One day she would sit down in the warm sun in her favourite place and welcome death. But certainly not on a cold, grey drizzly night in November.

Had Martina kept the decision open until the very end? Had it been just a possibility until the very last second, and had there been other options? After all, she had contacted the woman who was in hospital after the accident, which could be interpreted as a call for help.

On the other hand, she had blood on her hands!

Before Carola used the key, she rang the doorbell. She didn't know where the blood on the woman's hands came from and didn't want to be attacked by a surprised husband who thought she was a burglar. She rang twice more and heard the gong-type bell inside the house but waited in vain for a reaction.

A look towards the patrol car. Carola's courage ran out and she didn't want to be alone any more. She waved to the officers; both got out, one stayed with the car, the other came to her.

"Stay behind me and don't touch anything," Carola instructed him, then slid the key into the security lock, pushed open the door and called out: "Hello?"

There was no echo from the furnished rooms, yet Carola had the impression her voice was being thrown back as if she was not welcome here. *Get out and take your words with you!*

"Police! Is anyone home?"

She waited with one foot on the doorstep and listened. Behind her, the overweight officer was breathing loudly. Somewhere there was a soft ticking sound, maybe a clock. She also heard a scratching sound, followed by a strangely hectic vibration, quiet but perceptible.

Carola pulled her service weapon from its holster and entered the house. She wasn't quite sure herself why she pulled the gun; it was a gut decision, no doubt fuelled by the feeling out there on the edge of the forest that she hadn't been alone.

In retrospect she was embarrassed, but she really had run back to her car. With fear at her back and the overwhelming feeling of being followed. Someone had been there, somewhere in the undergrowth, someone watching her. But that was nonsense - who could have been there?

This feeling was now beginning to come back.

She was not alone in this house, even if no one had answered her ringing and calling, Carola felt sure.

Don't go any further, said a voice inside her. *Whatever you find here, you don't want to see.*

Carola nevertheless stepped further into the hallway.

The hall was short, maybe four metres, and at the end it opened out into a large room from which a little light filtered in, so that it was not completely dark. Carola headed for it, attracted like a moth to a streetlight. Beyond the doorway was the living room, a large room with a dining table and a corner sofa. The light came from the stand-by lights of the television, sat-receiver and Blu-ray player. The buzzing noise was more intense in this room and, after a short search, Carola discovered the cause. A lonely hamster was doing its rounds in a wheel. It froze in the light of the torch on her mobile phone and looked at her questioningly. Maybe it was her imagination, but Carola thought she could see hunger in its gaze. She struggled to suppress the urge to feed the animal.

The kitchen, bathroom, bedroom - all empty.

There was one more room, and when Carola pushed open the door, she knew immediately what awaited her behind it.

The heavy metallic smell of blood overlaid everything, seemed to have driven even the oxygen out of the room. Carola flicked on the light switch, but the light didn't come on, so she used the mobile phone torch again, which illuminated a child's room. Colourful walls with fluorescent stickers of sun, moon and stars, a cot, a changing table, curtains with smiling faces on them. The officer who knew the area was certain that the couple had no children. He knew that much, but probably not everything, not what lay in the near future.

Had Martina been pregnant?

Good God, I hope not, Carola thought.

Tim Spiekermann was propped up against the wall between the cot and the changing table, next to him a lamp that had been knocked over. He seemed to be holding it in his arms in a strangely affectionate, hunched way.

The large stain on the carpet between his legs and all around him had nothing to do with the flower pattern printed on it. It was his blood. As far as Carola could see, his upper body was covered with puncture wounds; even his neck and face had not been spared.

This was where the frenzied struggle had taken place. This was where Martina Spiekermann had bloodied her hands.

9

Carola Barreis fed the hamster while she waited for the forensic team. She couldn't stand the whirring of the colourful plastic wheel any longer, and the hamster probably didn't care what had happened in the house. It was hungry.

"So, can you make a statement?" Carola asked the small white-brown-black spotted animal.

At the moment, probably not, because it had its cheeks full, but it kept its eyes on her while it nibbled and chewed industriously. Carola had found the chew sticks in the drawer of the table where the hamster cage was. There was a lot more food in there.

"What were the last words spoken here, hmm? Tell me, little one, and I promise I'll put in a good word for you. Otherwise we'll get you for refusing to assist with our inquiries."

The long whiskers on the hamster's well-filled cheeks trembled; gratitude seemed to shine in his eyes. Carola knew nothing about hamsters, but this one clearly looked starved. She left him alone with his chew sticks and reluctantly turned away from the cage. Turning away meant turning to the case. Two more corpses on her account, which was already in trouble. Carola dreaded the interest that would be charged on it. The corpses had been making themselves felt for a long time, especially at night, when sleep and memories mixed their toxic cocktail. It was indeed as if a superior power was quietly and secretly debiting her life account. The question was, which? Time or energy? Hopefully not both!

The team would probably need another half hour; she could use that time. The two officers were outside, protecting the house, so she had time and peace to look around inside and get an overview. At first glance everything was clear: a relationship crime with subsequent suicide, but not the usual kind this time. It was not the woman who was the victim, but the man.

Or was it?

Carola would certainly find the answer in this house. Whatever had gone wrong with the Spiekermanns, the core lay between these grey walls, under this grey roof.

"Maybe they should have hired a different architect who knows something about feng shui," Carola said to herself as she walked through the gloomy house.

For a brief moment she longed for Taormina, for the warmth and colour of that stretch of land. Both did so much for her, healing the wounds that had been festering in the German drizzle. And then the view from the cliffs over the seemingly endless sea that merged with the sky on the horizon. If there was one place where one could confidently lose oneself, it was this one. Three more years and then it would be time. Retirement, pension, whatever you wanted to call it, the Taormina era would begin for her. The house was waiting. The brown earth was waiting. Her soul was waiting for a new beginning, far away from the wickedness of humans and their crimes.

But for the time being, there were things to do. Carola didn't want to go back to the nursery but she went anyway. How horrible to abuse a room where peace and happiness were supposed to reign. On her way there, she discovered bloody handprints on the walls and door frame. They were from small hands. In her mind's eye, Carola saw the confused Martina staggering through the house after the cruel deed, supporting herself here and there.

In the doorway to the child's room, Carola stopped and looked at everything very carefully. Why had Martina killed her husband in this room of all places? Why so many stab wounds? How had she managed to overpower him? Spiekermann was only a medium-sized man, but he looked strong. Carola had long since found the murder weapon: it was the kitchen sink. The knife was smeared with blood. The blade was about fifteen centimetres long, and the empty space in the magnetic knife rack on the wall showed where the knife belonged. Clean on the wall, dirty in the sink.

The young woman kills her husband in a bloodlust, then decides to kill herself, but puts the murder weapon neatly in the sink. Why didn't she slit her wrists with it, right here? Questions upon questions, but of course Carola knew she would not get a conclusive answer to all of them. People out of control did not act coherently - most people didn't even when they were in control. But it was precisely in such chaos that motivation and the course of events were easy to assess. Here, nothing was staged, no-one had tried to cover their tracks or lay out false trails.

Even if it seemed to the film-savvy public that most people died at the hands of serial killers who killed indiscriminately and out of pure lust, this was of course not the case. Relationship crimes dominated the murder statistics and always would. People did not want to be alone, nor could they cope with it. Being together, however, often enough ended in disaster. Carola considered herself lucky to be so messed-up. Self-absorbed, egotistical, egocentric, she preferred to talk to herself, to things or hamsters; in short, she was incapable of having a relationship. This meant she was safe from most murderers.

A nursery without a child. Ready furnished, probably in joyful anticipation. Carola would find out tomorrow whether Martina had been pregnant or not. Paul Müller, her friend and forensic pathologist, would do her the favour of starting the autopsy first thing in the morning, no matter who else was on his table.

The nursery seemed to Carola like a holy grail, like the manifestation of all the wishes of this couple, which is why the devastated corpse did not fit into this picture. Something had gone wrong. Had the wishes turned into the opposite? Was one person's wish not the other's? Had the pressure become too great?

As she was not allowed to contaminate the room with her own traces, she did not enter it, finally turned away and went to the bathroom.

Why grey tiles? What was wrong with a society where this depressing colour was the trend? At least white and a little accentuated red softened the gloom here, but it didn't make the house a chocolate-box cottage either.

In the bathroom there was a mirrored cabinet of the kind her parents had called "Allibert". It had taken Carola a long time to realise that this was not a name that the Barreis family had made up, but a brand name.

Allibert always held secrets, no matter where it hung.

"Well, old friend, what can you tell me?" she asked him.

First of all, the fine white speckles on the mirror from toothbrushing proved that the last cleaning had probably been a while ago. Carola looked at herself in the mirror for a moment. She saw her tired eyes, the dark valleys beneath them, wrinkles that connected them like rivulets. She didn't like her reflection and flung open Allibert's doors.

Beyond the usual things, there were medicines inside that Carola identified as barbiturates. Sleeping pills. Four packs. Who had taken them? Him or her? Carola checked the packs and noticed that two blister cards were missing. Most likely, she had just found the cause of Martina Spiekermann's death without the help of her friend Paul Müller. Apart from that, Allibert did not contain anything illuminating.

Carola then looked around the living room. There she found a shelf with files like almost every family had. Tax records, property records, pension records, personal records. Existences were embedded in files and depended on them.

There was a folder labelled "Ansgar Clinic".

Carola pulled it out and realised after the first two pages what had possibly gone wrong in this relationship.

Martina Spiekermann had not been able to get pregnant naturally and had undergone four artificial inseminations in the past three years. According to these documents, which Carola only half understood, none of these had been successful. The last treatment was a year and a half ago, then there was a break, and according to the latest sheet filed at the top, the next attempt at fertilisation was imminent.

The Spiekermanns had been trying to get pregnant for three years, and no doubt they had once again pinned all their hopes on this imminent date.

Had Martina been unable to withstand this pressure?

Chapter 2

1

Before

He had always loved the smell of fresh mortar. That's why he stirred it around with the trowel for longer than was necessary to mix the water and ready-mixed cement. Again and again he poked into the pudding-like grey mass, took some of it onto the trowel and slowly let it slide off the smooth metal back into the black bucket. As he did so, he traced the memories of his childhood, tried to associate the smell with images, and even though he felt he was close, he couldn't really do it. It was as if he were looking for his reflection in churning water. Maybe he caught a glimpse between two waves, maybe not, and if he did, the image was blurred and unclear. The trowel became a sword, the mortar a body.

It had been going on like this for years.

No-one could stand it in the long run.

And that's why he needed the mortar and the bricks, stacked neatly on the pallet, waiting to become a wall. He had broken them out of an old wall with his own hands, originally for a different purpose, and they were actually too good to seal the hole he was squatting in front of, but he didn't have any others and didn't want to order any for good reason.

"All right, here we go," he finally said into the dark eye of the hole. He knew his voice would fill the subterranean space beyond, perhaps even echo but in any case, it would be heard, even if of course he got no answer. He wet the dusty ledge with water, took mortar on the trowel, poured a layer on the ledge and then positioned the bricks on top. And because he was a fussy craftsman, he checked with the spirit level whether the first layer was straight. It didn't matter here, because no one would ever see this walled-up shaft, through which coal had been poured into the cellar in the past - at least not from the outside - but if you had standards, you had to meet them.

He also made sure that the joints were evenly thick. He inserted the bricks one by one, the hole became narrower and narrower, less and less daylight fell into the cellar. He wondered what it must feel like down there, to see light, freedom and hope slowly disappearing, brick by brick, joint by joint? Unable to do anything about being bricked up?

After five layers of bricks, only a narrow gap remained at the top of the hole - too narrow for another whole brick. He didn't want to cut the bricks, because that would make a lot of noise and dust, especially with red bricks, so he straightened up and went over to the slanted wooden flap that, when closed, hid the stairs. Now it stood wide open, like an invitation to take a step into the darkness. He went down, smelled the coal dust on the walls that had penetrated deep into the masonry over the years. In the narrow corridor, an old light bulb burned in a metal cage, between whose rusty bars perhaps the oldest spider in the world had created marvels. He had stood in front of it for half an hour with a hand brush in his hand, looking at the filigree interconnections and finally deciding not to destroy them. New threads, old threads, and all of them were connected with each other, none was superfluous. He saw analogies to human life - to his life. Cutting a thread to the past always had repercussions for the future - and these could not be controlled. Not even through death, as he had learned.

Four steps away from the spider's house, he turned left into the room where the old coal burner had once stood and heated the building. Now it housed the new gas central heating system, which was much smaller but had twice the output. He had used the space created by the renovation and built a new wall of natural stone behind the hot water boiler. There was still a gap in it, and he had to bend down to fit through it. His shoulders rubbed against the brickwork.

The room that emerged behind it was rectangular, with a brick vaulted ceiling. An ideal wine cellar, which was what it had been intended for, but it would not become one. Up under the ceiling, light shone through the narrow gap in its freshly set brick wall. The gap was two fingers wide, hardly more than a joint, but in the dark room the little light seemed like a spotlight shining into it. It fell at an oblique angle as an elongated rectangle on the dusty concrete floor. It did not reach as far as the corner where the chair stood, and all he could see were the wide-open eyes, or rather the whites of the eyes, which seemed to glow. Could it be? Did fear and panic give the eyes this ability?

The shaking of the head was no more than a supposition, the voice behind the gag not loud enough to alert anyone in the distant world outside. Actually, a wooden board would have been enough to close the old shaft, but better safe than sorry. You never knew, and anyway, he liked to build walls. Walls were much more solid, durable and better protected against a break-in or a break-out.

For the rest of the work, he needed more light.

He plugged in the small spotlight. He had bought it for other purposes, but wasn't it sensible to make use of it now? Without worrying about the eyes hovering behind him in the darkness, he looked at the inside of his handiwork. On the outside he had neatly filled in the joints, but down here the mortar was oozing like pus from between the stones. It could stay like that, no problem, no-one but himself and his guest would see it.

He had wood and a saw ready. As a good craftsman, he had planned the steps beforehand. He cut a board to size and fastened it over the remaining gap with wall hooks in the fresh joints. He had to climb the stepladder to do this, because the gap was directly under the two-and-a-half-metre-high ceiling.

The daylight was now completely extinguished.

He turned around because he was interested in the reaction.

Before he had started the masonry work, he had deliberately placed the chair so that his guest's gaze was directed towards the shaft. To the daylight, the exit, the way out. He was supposed to see what was happening, every single brick as it was inserted into the hole, as the daylight gradually disappeared. Now that the spotlight illuminated the room, the whites of the eyes lost their luminosity. They were still wide open, clearly showing the sheer limitless fear he felt.

That was how it should be.

That was the purpose of it all.

The pain would come later; for now the fear had to be enough to loosen his tongue.

Although there was still work to be done, he felt the urge to exchange a few words. And why not? He had earned it. So he went over and untied the knot of the gag that was round the man's head. The part that had covered his mouth was wet with saliva; he was disgusted by it and avoided touching it.

After the gag was removed, the man gasped and choked and bent right over as if he had to throw up. He gave him time. Time no longer played a role down here, at least not the forward-looking kind. From now on, it would only be about the past.

"You ... you can't do that," the man said when he had collected himself.

"Oh yes, I can."

"But why? What have I done to you?"

The man found the strength to lift his head and look at him. He was crying; tears traced bright streaks through the dirt of his cheeks.

He was aware that the man understood nothing, but he soon would. The deeper they delved into the past together, the clearer his future would become.

"Please let me go...I have a family."

"As if that ever meant anything to you."

What flashed in the man's eyes was not realisation, more a foreboding, or perhaps just shame. Shame, yes, would suit him.

"Are you afraid?" he asked.

The man nodded.

"You should be. It is important to me that you feel fear, as I have felt for years, day after day. And when you feel enough fear, you will tell me the whole story, the complete truth, I know it. I need to know everything, every detail, do you understand?"

He pointed to the bricked-up hole. "I've created a place for us to get to know each other like no two people have ever got to know each other before."

The man began to cry, snot running from his nose.

"There's only one way for you to survive."

"What? I'll do anything if you let me go."

"Say. My. Name."

But of course he couldn't.

2

Roya Mayer opened her eyes.

For the first few seconds she did not know where she was or what had happened. What was clear to her, however, was that she was not in the bedroom of her small two-room apartment where she usually woke up every morning. The usual sounds of morning rush-hour traffic and the rumbling of the neighbours from the floor above were missing. Wherever she was, it was frighteningly quiet here.

As soon as she started to move, Roya felt that her head was not quite right. It was as if the pain was sloshing back and forth inside her like water in a half-full jar, a dull pain that was slow to subside, a slight dizziness in its wake. Roya's stomach rebelled, as it always did when something was wrong with her sense of balance. Roya could not ride on a merry-go-round or go on a cruise without throwing up. Even a bus ride was difficult.

I had an accident, she suddenly remembered.

The thought immediately triggered memories, even including the smell and taste of the airbag - but most of all she saw blood dripping onto the car roof, which was below her, not above, and a mobile phone with a cracked screen.

Martina!

She didn't even have to move her head; just the name caused another wave of pain and nausea. And because she already felt dreadful, she risked it and looked around the room. She was in a hospital room, that much was clear. She did not have a fellow patient, nor was there another bed in the room that could be occupied. There was a shutter down in front of the window, so she did not know what time of day it was.

The sequence of events startled Roya. This was the second suicide she had been involved in. And then this accident when her family was already burdened enough by another accident. What was wrong with her that fate had dealt her such a hand?

Roya's hand automatically went to her neck, looking for the locket that everyone in her family wore. Her, Mum, Dad, her sister Jenna. It meant togetherness and love beyond death. Mum and Jenna had died in the accident and had taken their lockets with them to the grave. But where was hers? It was gone.

Had it been lost in the accident?

But the much more important question was: how much time had passed since the accident?

Was there still a chance to help Martina? Maybe she was waiting up there on the hill for another message from her.

Roya, who had never been in a hospital bed before, knew as well as anyone that there would be an emergency bell here. With careful movements of her head, she looked around and spotted a red push-button on a cable above her.

She pressed it as she had pressed the microphone icon on her mobile phone. A soft buzz sounded as confirmation. Less than a minute later, the door opened and a nurse came in. She smiled sympathetically at Roya.

"You're back with us – that's good. How are you? Does your head hurt?"

"My phone ... I need my phone," Roya said and caught a look that barely hid what the nurse was thinking.

Crashes because she's on her phone while driving, barely escapes with her life, and now can't think of anything but her damn phone again.

"I'm sorry, I don't know where your phone is ... do you want me to call someone for you?"

"No, I ..."

How was she supposed to explain to the nurse what she was worried about? And even if she did, the woman wouldn't be able to help her with it.

"Um... the police have asked us to inform them as soon as you are available. But it can wait until you feel better ... whatever you want."

"Yes, the police ... I really need to talk to the police!"

Roya tried to sit up in bed with excitement and immediately paid the price. Now the pain was no longer dull, but sharp; her stomach revolted and she could no longer control it. Nurse Silke understood immediately, pulled a spittoon from the bedside cabinet, gently bent Roya over it and held back her shoulder-length dark hair while she threw up. Nothing more than spit and liquid came out; her stomach was probably empty. Her throat burned and the taste in her mouth was just awful.

Exhausted, Roya let herself sink back into the pillows and let the nurse wipe her mouth.

"Thank you ..." she whispered, embarrassed.

"You have severe concussion, dizziness and nausea. You mustn't get excited and you must move slowly."

"Do I have any other injuries?"

Nurse Silke shook her head.

"A few minor cuts and bruises. You were very lucky, the paramedic who brought you in told us. It seems your car is a complete write-off."

This news also caused pain, but in a different part of Roya's body. Under her breastbone, where her solar plexus was, she felt a twinge and her chest tightened. Even if it sounded silly, she had loved her Suzuki. Suse, as she called it, had been a faithful companion for years.

"Still that bad?" the nurse asked. "I can give you something for the pain and nausea."
Roya shook her head cautiously. "I really need to talk to the police," she said quietly.

"I don't think that's a good idea. You'd better rest for a while and ..."

"But I have to!"

Her voice was pleading and insistent enough to make the nurse pause. "Okay."

She was almost out of the door when Roya called after her:

"How long was I unconscious?"

"Your accident was fourteen hours ago."

3

Carola Barreis entered the Forensic Medicine Institute of the Central Hospital in a bad mood and with a bad feeling in her stomach. She did not want to see what she was bound to see and she wished she could go far away, preferably to her favourite place in Italy, where she had spent her holidays for years. A small house on a mountainside, without electricity or internet. Six years ago, Carola had bought the cottage with her inheritance and planned to spend her retirement there. She associated one feeling in particular with this place: having time. She never had enough time here; it just ran away, disappearing between her fingers.

But there was still something she had to do, she was still on duty, and in the course of her duties she would now see another corpse on the bare metal table of an autopsy room. Two more corpses, to be precise. No-one could take this off her hands, she was the boss, a strong woman, leading men who weighed twice as much as her, who were sometimes half her age, and she certainly did not lack self-confidence. But as she set foot on the stairs leading to the basement, Carola felt anything but strong. She wished someone would take this task from her. Besides, she was angry with that Martina Spiekermann. It was one thing to leave your life voluntarily, but quite another to take someone with you and make them suffer like that.

Carola Barreis stumbled down the stairs with one hand on the banister. When she reached the first basement floor, she took refuge in the staff toilets and locked herself in one of the cubicles. There she sat down on the toilet seat and listened.

No noises, she was alone.

A few minutes ... She would just take a few minutes to prepare herself for what was to come. That was not a sign of weakness; it was simply human. But no-one could see.

No sooner had she had the thought than she heard the door open and close again, and it sounded as if someone was locking it from the inside.

Carola froze.

Footsteps approached, quietly, carefully. Bendy plastic soles that hardly made a sound. A soft squeak, nothing more. Someone entered the cubicle right next to her, although there were

half a dozen others, all empty. What was that about? Had someone seen her disappear into the toilet?

Suddenly she heard a cigarette lighter light up and a moment later she smelled smoke. Someone had retreated here to smoke, even though smoke detectors were installed on the ceiling. Carola felt like an intruder and breathed as shallowly as possible so as not to make any noise. She would just sit motionless until the smoker disappeared.

"I took the batteries out years ago," said a male voice Carola knew all too well. "So you can light up too."

"I don't smoke any more," she replied after her initial surprise.

Instead of answering, the man slipped a pack of cigarettes and a lighter under the partition.

Carola thought for exactly two seconds about whether virtues like discipline and self-control were still important at her age – or whether they would simply spoil her fun. The decision was unanimous, the admonishing voice inside her was silent. Better that way. Her rebellious inclinations were in a hell of a mood today. Carola reached for the pack and lighter and lit a cigarette. The routine was still there, the body didn't forget so quickly after years of training. And it immediately remembered the poison, took it gratefully, welcomed it with every cell. Until she had taken the first two drags, which felt like a release, her neighbour remained silent.

"Isn't this a women's toilet?" Carola said as she exhaled.

"My institute, my rules, and I shit where I want," Paul Müller replied.

"Don't you dare," Carola threatened.

"Don't worry, I don't have to right now. Constipation. I had dinner with Anastasia yesterday and had a steak."

"Please spare me the details of your digestion."

Paul was silent. Actually, he liked to hear himself talk, liked to be the centre of attention, but also had the gift, rare among men, of shutting up at the right moment - or maybe it was just their special relationship and his understanding of her sensitivities. Carola could almost feel him smoking. Her seventh sense was legendarily good, so it was within the realm of possibility.

"And I can put you in the picture wherever I want," Paul finally broke the tiled silence. "So why not here?"

Paul Müller was sixty-six years old, a luminary of forensic medicine, extroverted, exalted, simply different from others. Carola loved him. It had been a while since they had been in bed, and she would not let it flare up again, but she could still love Paul. He made it easy for her to do so.

"As long as we stay alone."

"I've locked the door. We'll be alone no matter what."

"How dangerous! I could claim you sexually harassed me. You'd never get out of that one."

"Everyone knows you here," Paul replied, bored. "So I would get all the pity."

Carola laughed smoke through her nose.

"Go ahead," she said quietly, leaning back against the cold wall, pressing the heels of her boots against the toilet door and taking a deep drag. Carola felt the nicotine flood her lungs and

then spread through her body. She knew exactly what the poison was doing to her, but at that moment she didn't care.

Who Wants to Live Forever by Queen popped into her head. Great! She would be walking around with that song in her head all day now. At least it wasn't the worst song.

"Martina Spiekermann, 28 years old, one seventy-two, sixty-three kilos. Healthy. Appendicitis scar. Seven well-healed scars on the insides of her forearms ..."

"She cut herself?"

"I'd say so. Long time ago. Probably in her youth."

"Was she pregnant?"

"No." At least that was something, Carola thought.

Paul had a pleasant voice. Sonorous, calm, well-oiled, so to speak. Carola had always liked to listen to him, even in bed, after sex. Meanwhile he had written three books. Not purely technical books, but entertaining. People liked to read reports from forensic medicine, for whatever reason. Paul had read the audio books himself, and Carola had listened to them. In bed at night, alone, or during long car rides to Taormina. It had been nice to fall asleep or cruise along listening to his voice. Even this subject somehow sounded less terrible coming from him.

"Go on," Carola urged him. "What did she die of?"

"Barbiturates, I suppose. The investigations are not yet complete. If I were you, I'd check the victim's house..."

"I did," Carola interrupted Paul, who had always liked to give her advice on her investigations. Sometimes it was helpful, but often it was just annoying. Paul had never said it, but Carola suspected he would have liked to have been a detective himself.

"There are several of them in her bathroom."

"Then it fits with the suicide assumption."

Carola could not help thinking of the overwhelming feeling that she had not been alone that night up there in the woods on the hill. As the years had gone by, her senses had diminished, she knew that. Her hearing, vision and sense of smell were no longer so acute, but the so-called seventh sense was. Intuition. Signals from the subconscious. Someone had been there, Carola was sure of it.

"She has a head injury," said Paul Müller. "Dorsal. At the lambdoid suture, between the parietal bone and the occipital bone. An unusual spot, quite deep at the back of the head."

"Did she fall?"

"No-one falls on the back of their head unless they are pushed."

"So someone hit her on the head, from behind?"

"Presumably. Or pushed her, as I said."

Maybe there had been a fight in the Spiekermann house, maybe Tim had managed to fight back. Or maybe the attack had come from him. Domestic violence directed at the perpetrator.

"No other injuries?"

"Slight contusions on the upper and lower arms, as if someone had held her down."

"Maybe she was defending herself against an attack and stabbed her husband in self-defence?" Carola thought aloud.

Martina was not pregnant but had been waiting for an appointment for fertility treatment. Longingly? Or full of fear? Had a child been her wish, or her husband's, which he

wanted to enforce against her will? Had there been an argument about it last night that had degenerated into violence? Carola imagined how Martina could have been attacked by her husband, defended herself, lost control, one thing led to another and ended in a catastrophe. Out of desperation, she then killed herself.

Carola would talk to the doctors treating her, as well as to friends and acquaintances, before she could form a final opinion.

"Self-defence...?" said Paul, laughing dryly through his nose, probably exhaling smoke.

"To date, eighteen couples have lain on my metal tables, from middle-aged to very old. Peacefully united, which they couldn't managed to do during their lifetime ... I ask myself whether it was actually right for them to lie next to each other? Or is it impious? What do you think?"

"I don't think they would have cared."

Paul took a drag on his cigarette and now seemed to have to think. For a man who cut open and disembowelled people, he was quite spiritually inclined. He believed in some kind of afterlife.

"Not self-defence," he continued. "Eighteen stab wounds. Two in the head, two in the neck, the rest spread over the chest, stomach, back and ... genitals."

"How many?"

"In the genitals?"

"Yes."

"Four."

"Interesting."

"Do you think there is a connection between the number of genital injuries and the perpetrator's motivation?"

"Well, she was his wife. Rumour has it that he's a bully when he's drunk ...", Carola said.

"And he had quite a bit of alcohol in his blood," Paul interjected.

"... in their house there's a fully furnished nursery with all the trimmings. Above the bed, ducks and tails dance to relaxing lullabies ... yes, I think there's a connection."

"But the woman never gave birth."

"That's exactly what I'm talking about."

"Sometimes I think you're cruel," Paul said.

"I'm just clay, shaped by life."

"That's my phrase. But you're welcome to use it."

"Thank you. Any indication that someone other than the wife killed the husband?"

"One thing is odd."

Paul enjoyed his rhetorical pause.

"I'll be even crueller if you don't come out with it."

"The four stabs in the genitals were done with the left hand, the others with the right."

Carola processed the information and compared it with the two bloody hands of the woman on the tree. On the other hand, it didn't fit.

"Eighteen stabs," she thought aloud. "That's enough to make a woman's arm go weak. Can you tell the order of the stabs?"

"You want to know if she started at the top and worked her way down?"

"Exactly."

"No, I can't. And it doesn't make sense in that order or the reverse. If she started at the bottom, after four stabs it was too early to need to change hands out of fatigue. If she started at the top, it was too late."

"So she stabbed randomly."

"Probably. But here's the second thing that stands out: all the stabs were made with approximately the same intensity, the blade always penetrated almost the same depth. If you're right-handed, you don't stab so well with your left. The reverse is also true."

How did that fit together? A relationship crime was plausible and comprehensible on the basis of the facts. Was there someone who wanted to make it look that way? However, that didn't fit with the stabbings either. Two perpetrators? That would be an explanation for the different stabbings, but it would be rather far-fetched.

"What do you think?" asked Paul.

Before she could reply, Carola's mobile vibrated. She answered it and found out that the woman who had been injured in the car accident was awake and desperate to speak to the police.

That's convenient, Carola thought. I'll only need to go up a few floors. And this woman can probably answer some questions for me.

"I have to go. Will you write in your report that I was present at the autopsy?"

"Always for you, you know."

4

"Come a bit closer, I want to tell you something. Are you listening closely? Are you listening with your heart? Are you ready? Okay... you can stop asking yourself if you are up to the standards of this world, whether you are good enough, whether you look good enough, whether your performance is good enough. You can stop because everyone else around you is asking the same questions, being eaten up by the same fears, subjecting themselves to the same standards, and none of these questions have any meaning.

Has anyone ever asked you how your inner self is doing? What your inner voice whispered to you today? What feelings your solar plexus sends to every corner of your body to make you feel good?

No, nobody asks about that. Because no one is really 'in' themselves any more. We are on the 'outside', around ourselves, with others, their opinions, demands, prejudices. We devour the images and compare our appearance with them. Am I beautiful enough, is my car expensive enough, my clothes cool enough, my holiday photo exclusive enough, am I unique, do I stand out?

But you will never be unique if you reduce yourself to the outside. The truly unique people in our history have changed the course of history through thought, not through photos of themselves. They found out by thinking that the earth is not a disc and not the centre of the galaxy.

And now look around.

We live on a screen, we have become one-dimensional. If you go behind the projection screen of expectations, you will find nothing behind it, no depth, no spirit, no soul.

Change that and you will become happy. Go into yourself, find your inner voice, from now on listen only to that and block out the images that are supposed to bedazzle you.

Are you ready to change your life?

You also feel that it can't go on like this for much longer, that we are running at full speed into the abyss, everyone feels it, but no-one steps on the brakes. On the contrary, the pace is being pushed further and further, everything has to go faster and faster. It is the really powerful people of this world who determine our speed, because when we are running, when we are constantly out of breath, we do not think. We are like hamsters in a wheel. We have to have our eyes everywhere so that we don't miss anything, but we can't see inside ourselves.

Speed and excessive demands are the modern means of enslavement. But just as the old means did not work forever, the new ones will not work for long either. Why not?

Let me tell you. Come a little closer so that I can whisper it to you, so that it can penetrate deep into you and become a part of you.

You have stepped on the brakes.

At this moment, as you are listening to me, you are no longer part of the raging maelstrom.

You are within yourself. Hearing yourself. Feeling yourself.

And? Doesn't it feel great?

Write and tell me how it feels for you."

Sarah Henschel held her breath because now came "her" part.

She sat on the little white bench in the grounds of the nursing home where she worked. Across the street, the old ducks, fat-fed by the residents and with only a tiny watering hole to splash in, were cleaning themselves. Sarah was using her break to listen to an old episode of Hear & Feel.

On a day like this, in which two residents she had grown fond of had died and the usual routine still had to go on as if nothing had happened, she simply needed a dose of Marc Maria Hagen. Sarah also wanted to prepare herself for the talk with him. She was a little nervous, worried that he might not take her seriously, that he might not recognise her depth.

"Here's a message from Sarah," Marc said, reading out what Sarah had written to him a few weeks ago during the first broadcast of the podcast.

"You speak from my soul," he read out. "I feel like I can no longer decide for myself where my path leads. There are so many forks in the road, but I am driven past them, I can't stop. Not even for the most important questions."

"Yes, Sarah, you can stop and you are already doing so. Tell me one really important question that is troubling you."

There was a small pause during which Marc waited for Sarah to write something, and Sarah remembered that her first impulse had been to write something else, but didn't dare and instead wrote "How do I know if I really love and am loved?"

"Dear Sarah, if you understand Hear & Feel in the sense that I mean, then you already have the answer within you. Our inner voice does not work like a question-and-answer game. We can't stand there and formulate a question and hope to get an answer in the form of an

instruction. It's more sophisticated, but at the same time it's also a simple relief. And now I'm not going to come at you with the stupid phrase 'if you need to ask yourself whether you love, then you don't'. That's scripted crap. Your question comes from the fears that drive us all, not from any pre-existing certainty. And that's where Hear & Feel comes in. Pay attention to what you feel and hear inside when you are alone and nothing and no-one distracts you. Then, my dear Sarah, you will find your answer..."

Sarah switched off the podcast. She only had a half-hour break, five minutes left. Just enough time to watch the fat ducks cleaning themselves and to ask herself the question she had wanted to ask at the time.

Was she with the right partner?

Sarah thought she loved him, she longed for him when she was alone, she felt comfortable around him.

So he was the right one, wasn't he?

But what about his black spots?

5

Roya Mayer didn't have to wait long.

Fifteen minutes after the nurse hurried off to call the police, there was a knock at the door, and after her "come in", a woman in her late fifties entered the room. She was around five foot seven, very slim, had shoulder-length, silver-white, straight hair and a haggard face. Her cheekbones stood out clearly, as did the imposing nose, but what was most impressive about this unusual face were the eyes. Light blue, clear, cold.

She wore brown boots with high heels, tight jeans, a white shirt, a checked shirt over it - almost a cowgirl look.

"Inspector Barreis," she introduced herself and showed her ID. "How are you?"

"My head feels terrible, but otherwise quite well, I think."

"Then you feel able to answer a few questions for me?"

"Yes, of course ...", Roya said and immediately followed up with the question that was burning on her mind. "Do you know anything about Martina?"

While waiting, she had been thinking about what might have happened during the time she had been asleep. If the police thought it was a normal traffic accident due to using a mobile phone at the wheel, they probably wouldn't have asked the hospital staff to inform them immediately when Roya woke up - and the police wouldn't have sent an inspector either. Roya could not really remember what had happened immediately after the accident. She knew she had been conscious for a moment and had spoken to someone, but had she been able to pass on information about Martina? Had the police rushed to where Roya thought Martina was? To her special place, that imposing beech tree at the edge of the forest?

Inspector Barreis nodded. It was a nod that immediately told her something had gone terribly wrong. Roya's stomach tightened into a tiny, hot lump.

The inspector stepped in front of the window, whose blind was now raised, crossed her arms in front of her chest and looked at Roya with a gaze that went deeper than any she had ever seen before - and that included her father's gaze. She hadn't been able to keep anything a secret from her father, not even the theft of a pack of chewing gum from the supermarket when she was eight years old.

"Is Martina dead?" Roya asked cautiously, turning her head to the inspector so that she wouldn't miss a syllable of the answer.

"Yes. She's dead."

Roya closed her eyes. Immediately she saw Martina Spiekermann sitting with her back against the tree, sunshine on her pretty but sad face, her legs bent, her arms wrapped around her knees. She looked vulnerable, and she was, much more vulnerable than Roya had thought. Martina's gaze had wandered over the mown wildflower meadow, and she had pointed with her chin in a vague direction.

Sitting here early in the morning, you can watch deer. In spring, even with their fawns. I think they noticed me, but they didn't care. They trusted me ... trusted me with their lives ... that's reckless, you can't do that. People always have weapons with them ... knives, guns, words, thoughts ...

Roya remembered the words very well. She herself made her living with words, but she had never thought of it that way - even though she knew better than anyone that words could kill.

Why is this happening again? Surely it can't be a coincidence? Is it fate that has it in for me?

"How did you know Mrs Spiekermann?" the inspector asked, snapping Roya out of her thoughts.

"From research," Roya replied. "We spoke on the phone and met twice."

"When was that? "

"We met a week ago, spoke on the phone two weeks before that."

"Where did you meet?"

"At her special place, as she called it. The tree where she hanged herself."

"What makes you think she hanged herself?"

"Because, well... Because she told me about it. Martina didn't have an easy life. She often thought about death, including her own. In her dreams she hanged herself from her favourite tree. Those were her words."

"Let me get this straight ... Mrs Spiekermann announced her suicide to you?"

"No!" Roya exclaimed, startled because the inspector misunderstood her so badly. "Martina was feeling better, she wasn't planning to kill herself ... "

How stupid that sounded in the face of events. How poor her knowledge of human nature was. Roya had been sure that Martina was stable, otherwise she wouldn't have done the interview.

Or would she?

Was she now so blinded that she would risk everything to convict this hypocrite who pretended to want to help people? How much was she to blame for Martina's death?

"Did you find Martina?"

Inspector Barreis sighed.

"Yes, I found Mrs Spiekermann lifeless. I got there about an hour and a half after your accident, but by then it was too late for any help."

Roya didn't know what to say. She had been at a loss for words last night, and now she was at a loss for words again. There could no longer be any question of professional distance.

"You are a journalist?" the inspector asked in a tone that made it clear what she thought of the profession.

"Yes. Freelance. I mainly write online articles."

"Then you realise that I would like some questions answered. Why don't you start at the beginning? Tell us in turn how you came to have that accident last night."

Roya found the inspector's brusque manner rude but refrained from making equally brusque remarks. What was the point of antagonising the woman? So Roya told how she had contacted Martina Spiekermann to interview her as part of a series of online articles dealing with the dangers of social media. It was not easy to get these people to give an interview, because of course it was always about private, if not intimate things like fear, shame, weaknesses, mistakes and feelings, and many of the people concerned looked for the reason for their social media experiences in themselves, not in the people who were really responsible for it. Martina, however, had been different; she had understood that she was not the problem, and she had honestly wanted to talk about it. The only condition for the interview had been that it had to take place at her special place, the very tree at the edge of the forest. Martina had justified this by saying that her husband was not interested in such things and that she could not talk openly at home. That might be true, but Roya had quickly realised during the conversation what an influence the place had on Martina. How it helped her to open up. Roya reported that when they met, Martina Spiekermann was a thoroughly positive, clear-headed woman. She had made plans; she was going to withdraw from social media, fulfil her desire to have a child and finally break away from her parents. This topic had been particularly important to her. Martina had described her father as a drunkard, her mother as a submissive woman who never spoke out against her husband. However, Roya was not interested in her personal situation, but in what Martina had experienced and what she had exchanged with the other members of the forum. It had been a painful episode, but she seemed to have come to terms with it well. There had been no talk of suicide; this phase of her life was obviously behind her.

"And then last night she suddenly wrote me a message."

"What kind of message?"

"Help me ... I'm at the tree."

"Those were her words?" the inspector asked.

"As I said, she only wrote them. I was the only one who spoke, but no matter what I said, she didn't answer ... I knew about the tree, and since I wasn't far from the place, twenty minutes by car at the most, I immediately set off. I ... I was sure that I could stop Martina ... and then this truck came towards me and ... "

Roya broke off.

Now the tears she had been holding back came. They felt hot and bitter, they tasted of guilt, and for a moment Roya wondered if she shouldn't tell the inspector the whole truth. Why she had really sought contact with Martina. But what good would that do? She had to finish this mission alone anyway.

"Did Mrs Spiekermann talk to you about her desire to have a child?" the inspector asked. Roya nodded and was glad to be able to talk about Martina instead of herself.

"Yes, she did. She had been trying to get pregnant for some time and was sad that she had not been able to fulfil her husband's heart's desire."

"What do you mean? What was the reason for her suicide?"

Roya shook her head.

"I ... I really don't know. Martina was making plans, wanted to try fertility treatment again... if I had known what she was thinking of, I would have sought help for her immediately."

"Could it have something to do with the interview? What exactly was it about? Bullying? Abuse?"

"My series of articles is not about the usual spectrum of body shaming, hate speech and shitstorms, these issues are and have been covered enough. I'm talking about the huge bubble of pseudo-spiritual influencers who pretend to want to help people but are ultimately only interested in money and power."

"So it has nothing to do with bullying and abuse?"

"Oh yes. Because that's exactly the business model these people use. You know, there are countless people using the internet who are in a really bad way because of this issue, who doubt themselves, have no self-worth any more and are therefore sitting ducks."

"So they earn money online because the internet makes some people sick. Did I understand that correctly?"

"It's not the internet that makes some people sick, but the people on it. But yes, you have understood that correctly."

"And you, in turn, earn money by writing articles about it."

Roya withstood the inspector's disparaging look, but said nothing, since her last comment had not been a question anyway.

"And Ms Spiekermann moved in this ... what did you call it? Pseudo-spiritual influencer bubble?" the inspector asked.

"Like so many others, she was looking for advice and help, answers to vital questions, which of course also had to do with her unfulfilled wish to get pregnant."

"And did she get the answers?"

"She got some answers and spent a lot of money on them. On books, seminars, coaching, paid memberships with podcasters or influencers, esoteric things that are advertised and sold there."

"So you can say that Ms Spiekermann was susceptible to such things because of her psychological condition," the inspector said.

"You can say that, yes."

"Did any of these influencers advise her to take her own life?"

"No, these people don't do that. But they freely give questionable advice without having the expertise or even an inkling of the problems they can cause. I have spoken to people who have lost everything because they listened to this kind of advice, who have cut themselves off from their family overnight because it was supposedly keeping them from finding themselves."

Roya wondered if she should be more specific. Should she name names? No, it was better to stay general. The police would have no reason to investigate the man, and even if they

did, he wasn't doing anything illegal. And if he was in any way the reason for Martina's unexpected suicide, it would probably be impossible to prove.

"Why didn't you contact the police immediately when Mrs. Spiekermann informed you that she wanted to kill herself?"

That sounded like an accusation and didn't go down well with Roya. The wording "informed" alone was appalling and did not correspond to what had happened. Martina had not explicitly said that she would kill herself. But to someone who knew her background, her text message suggested that she would.

"Because I was nearby anyway and the police wouldn't have been any quicker," Roya said.

"Since you didn't get there, the police would have been quicker. Don't you think?"

Roya bit her lip and swallowed the provocation. It was a bitter medicine that would undoubtedly take effect. She and Barreis would not become friends, that much was certain.

"After the interview, did you at least talk to her relatives about Mrs Spiekermann's thoughts? With her husband, for example?"

"No, that ... Martina didn't want that."

"Mrs Spiekermann didn't want that?"

The inspector pushed herself off the window sill and walked across the room.

"She agreed to make her thoughts accessible to a wider audience through an interview, but she didn't want her husband to know about it?"

Roya rubbed her temples. The spurts of pain became more intense. Every movement and every further accusation from the inspector triggered a new wave.

"I ... what was I supposed to do? She made it a condition that I must not tell her husband."

"Well, everyone thinks only of themselves, don't they? The haters, the influencers, the pseudo-spiritual gurus ..."

The inspector left the sentence unfinished; it was clear who would take the last place in the list.

"This interview, where can I read it?"

"Nowhere yet. It is going to be published soon ... "

Only at that moment did Roya realise that she could forget it. Out of respect, at least, the interview with Martina would never appear anywhere. And if it came out what was really behind it, she would no longer work for any newspaper, off or online.

No matter! Her mission was more important than anything else.

"I would like to talk about last night again...", began the inspector, who continued to walk up and down the room.

But Roya would not and could not answer any more questions. Her headache was getting worse, she felt nausea rising, and besides, the woman was getting on her nerves with her pointedly rude questions. She made Roya feel that it was all her fault.

"I don't feel so good," she said, massaging her temples.

"Earlier you said..."

Roya grabbed the spittoon bowl on the trolley, held it under her chin and started to gag. It was part show, part real. She could have held back the nausea, but she didn't want to.

When she started to spit, the inspector took flight and called out that she would get help.

